

GFA

December 2022

Collecting as Thinking: An Interview with Pedro Barbosa
By Denis Maksimov

*What does it mean to collect art “correctly”? We chat
with Pedro Barbosa, a Brazilian collector with clear
ideas on his role and mission*



Pedro Barbosa. Photo by Ding Musa

Pedro Barbosa is an unusual collector with an exact plan and rare dedication to a purpose. He started collecting in 1999 to raise his children in an environment where they would be exposed to visual arts and critical thinking. “A kinetic piece by Jesús Rafael Soto was the first piece I bought. It is here, behind me, on the left side,” he says while reaching behind his shoulder during our recent video call. In the beginning, Barbosa did not find it essential to meet the artists whose works he acquired, especially as many of them had passed away. A personal connection has become necessary for him now, as he values the conversation with artists as much as their works.

Objects and discourse

“When I wanted my collection to be more international, I joined forces with Jacopo Crivelli Visconti, an independent curator and critic based in Sao Paulo who curated the Sao Paulo Biennial last year. We worked together from 2012 to 2019, having fun and designing other ways to collect; this is the direction I managed to go.” says Barbosa. Initially, his collection mostly featured geometric abstraction, which became so tiresome as to prompt him to shift his attention towards the more fertile grounds of politically engaged art and social criticism. “Crivelli Visconti steered the ship with expertise and knowledge. A few years after we started working together, we began a discussion centered around the importance of art publications, archival materials and their relation to the artworks. This is when I started building up the archive, which is my focus today,” mentions Barbosa.



Gustavo Torrezan, *Lesson II*, flag of Brazil folded according to the official procedures of the flag of the United States of America, variable dimensions, 2019. Courtesy of the artist.

“I still don’t know what I do precisely,” he says while laughing, “but what I want to do is to foster research and critical thinking in art; that’s why I either collect very young artists like Gustavo Torrezan or the archives of the very established ones such as Joseph Kosuth.” Currently, the archival material Barbosa prefers to purchase consists of performance recordings, independent publications, artists’ books, leaflets, etc. These works allow him to build a contextual discourse around the artist in question, but also to make this knowledge public – a discursive library previously unseen in the country – for the use of the young generation of Brazilian artists.

Bridging the gaps

“Very few people earn a living with their artistic production, and 99% of the artists are excluded from what is called ‘the art market’,” says Pedro Barbosa. “The critical discussion about what was produced and what is being produced now in the art world is missing. Only 1% is visible, while the huge corpus of art remains hidden.” The orientation of the art world towards the market and its trends impoverishes the cultural richness of what actually exists. While art magazines publish almost exclusively about commercial shows, and academic journals feature important critical works but for a small audience, the space in between remains hollow. In it, one can find practices like that of Ghislaine Leung, whose work with child safety gates recently exhibited at Essex Street/Maxwell Graham in New York is now part of the Barbosa collection.



Ghislaine Leung, *Gates*, 2019. Score: Child safety gates installed on all thresholds in the exhibition space. Edition 1 of 3 + 2AP. Collection of Pedro Barbosa, Sao Paulo.

He says about it: “The idea of gates and fences occupies a special place in the imaginary of our societies, especially in Brazil. What I liked in this work was the gesture, the action of opening the gates that the artist required from the visitor. You cannot be just a passerby: you must actively do something to proceed.” Those spaces in between are often separated by the gated borders of class, nationality, race, and gender – the subject of access and permission, so pertinent in contemporary Brazil, is a continuous interest to Barbosa.

Grey matter over retina

“There are many interesting artists today indeed. Take Carolyn Lazard, whose works fascinate me, but also the white paintings by Ian Law, with their specific monochromatism that captured my attention,” Barbosa says. In Brazil, one of his latest discoveries is Gustavo Torrezan, whose work at the intersection between academic and artistic resonates with him. The importance of supporting and collecting “correctly”, assuming a priori responsibility for the outcomes of what you show, communicating about it and setting up the discursive agenda around it defines Barbosa’s approach. It is a matter of patience, attention to detail, and context of the artwork across time and conceptual space.

“Although it has become one of the most popular criteria for many people, visual excitement is not something I am interested in. If this trend persists, I will likely be excluded from the art scene, since I won’t be able to follow this aesthetics,” he says while laughing. And even if Barbosa doesn’t subscribe to new trends, he still follows the spaces and programmes that promote them, as he is interested in the institutionally mediated dialogue on taste between generations. This conversation is traceable and expressed in archival, contextual material around the artwork: the self-published books and zines, recordings, etc.

CURRENT RESEARCH PROJECTS HOUSE OF CORRECTION, HULLSDURO and MOYAGENSING PRISONS April, 1963						
No. of Protocol	Date Approved	Brief Description of Test	Name of Investigator	Fee Paid to Inmate Volunteer	Number of Inmates To Be Used	Source - Name of Firm Providing Money
C-1	August 28, 1962	To determine effect of Valium on Electrolyte and Hormonal Balance	Research Testing Assoc., Inc. (Dr. M. Cahn)	\$100.00	Five (5)	Wyeth Laboratories, Inc
M-64	March 6, 1963	To study use of Bio-Hibiana Lozenges for relief of sore throat and throat irritation	Research Testing Assoc., Inc. (Dr. M. Cahn)	Continuous Project	100 inmates will be used	Ayerst Laboratories, Inc.
M-65	March 7, 1963	To determine blood levels produced by Valium time spanules	Research Testing Assoc., Inc. (Dr. M. Cahn)	\$ 12.00	Six (6)	Hoffman-LaRoche, Inc.
M-66	March 7, 1963	Pergalen in the treatment of ecchymoses	Research Testing Assoc., Inc. (Dr. M. Cahn)	\$ 5.00	Ten (10)	Lloyd Brothers
M-67	March 8, 1963	Kentholatum Study (L & H 59596) blood level study after local application	Research Testing Assoc., Inc. (Dr. M. Cahn)	\$ 6.00	Two (2)	LeWell and Harrison Laboratories
M-68	March 11, 1963	To study tolerance of MDR-304 (tranquilliser)	Research Testing Assoc., Inc. (Dr. M. Cahn)	\$ 3.00 per week	Thirty (30)	National Drug Co.
M-69	March 11, 1963	To determine effect of a 45 mgm. divided oral dose of Okazepam - Wy-3498 (Librium analogue)	Research Testing Assoc., Inc. (Dr. M. Cahn)	\$125.00	Twenty (20)	Wyeth Laboratories, Inc
M-70	March 12, 1963	To test absorption of lidocaine in ice injection of lidocaine	Research Testing Assoc., Inc. (Dr. M. Cahn)	\$ 1.00	Three (3)	Squibb Laboratories, Inc.
M-71	March 13, 1963	To study effect of belladonna suspension (Belladonna)	Research Testing Assoc., Inc. (Dr. M. Cahn)	\$ 1.00/day	Twenty (20)	McNeil Laboratories
C-2	March 25, 1963	Double blind study using placebo to determine baseline physiological	Graduate School University of Pennsylvania	\$ 10.00	Twelve (12)	McNeil Laboratories

Carolyn Lazard, *Pre-Existing Condition*, 2019. HD Video, 6 min. Courtesy the artist and Maxwell Graham, New York.

Collection as an institution

“We stop buying when the work of an artist reaches a certain price on the market. Today, our focus is on building the archive. Our website is a platform to host essential conversations and a base for the long-term projects we are developing,” Barbosa says. The moraes-barbosa collection (cmb) currently has about nine people on staff. It commissions texts and publishes discursive and critical content almost daily. The collection works as a collective. The artists that run the organisation have a critical voice in the archive’s agenda. cmb pays fair wages to researchers, authors and collaborators, acting according to the ethics it professes. “I admire the approach of Raven Row in London, which puts on the most intelligent exhibitions I have seen. We want to pursue this role model with our collection,” he says.

Barbosa became even more specific when our conversation turned to institutions. New York’s MoMA is for him the most important one, a brand even. He follows their contemporary art programme closely, and he is close to the curator of media and performance, Stuart Comer. He appreciates the institutions that challenge him, among which is the KW Institute of Contemporary Art in Berlin: “They are risk-takers. Krist Gruijthuijsen has put on a programme for five years that is just fascinating. The show of Ian Wilson, who has an important place in my collection, was just amazing, and the way the KW showed David Wojnarowicz’s work was impeccable,” he says. He also finds Madrid’s Reina Sofia Museum outstanding, especially its commitment to making Latin American artists and their critical history more visible. The Instituto Moreira Salles is the institution Barbosa considers as a role model within Brazil. Their exhibitions, especially those after the COVID pandemic, were thoroughly researched; they featured what is invisible in both commercial galleries and other museums in the country.



Left: Gustavo Torrezan, *Night*, stars made of muiracatiara wood and black two-way fabric. 5.4 x 3.8 x 0.4 meters, 2021. Courtesy of the artist. Right: Jesús Rafael Soto, *Petite Ronde Olive*, 1998. Courtesy of Pedro Barbosa Collection.

Passing wisdom

“Buy with your heart, not with your ears: this is very important advice,” Barbosa says when I ask him what he’d like to say to young collectors. If you ask a philosopher who they’d like to meet, the most common answer is Plato. But what if genuine pearls of wisdom are right under our noses? Barbosa confirms: “Collecting is a process; you do things rightly and wrongly, and you learn from both. Since the start, I have sold only 1% or 2% of my collection, as one piece depends on the other. I think I am fortunate in this regard.”